

Hood River Glacier.

HOOD RIVER, OR., JULY 20, 1889.

Her Rival's Valentine.

"But he shall never claim you," she murmured; "I will spare the maid, and at the last moment kill the mistress. After that they may do with me what they please."

She went to the window and sat down. The landscape without was bright and fair, but she saw nothing, a mist was before her eyes.

"Bardolph deceived me," she muttered; "he was not dead, and the fool paid the penalty of his deceit. Do I regret that sin? No; not as I live, and I will go on. Basil shall never claim his bride."

CHAPTER XII.

ANOTHER LETTER.

How Ruth managed to keep her secret is not easy to say, but keep it she did, and hid the joy that bubbled in her heart like the warm water of a geyser, only finding full vent at times when she was alone.

And Vida kept it too, and the effort required on her part taxed her sorely. She had trouble to hide in the place of joy, and with an ever-aching heart she went about with a smiling face.

How was it possible for Basil to be alive? And if alive, and well, ending to write, why could he not return at once?

Vida knew that he was, if living, true to Ruth, and herein lay the great puzzle. Being true, why did he keep away?

Then at times Vida would think that the letter was a jest, but she could not call to mind anyone on whom she could with the least show of reason fix it.

It was all a puzzle, a problem, the solving of which might bring ruin upon her.

"But they shall not triumph over me," she thought. "I may die, but I will leave aching hearts behind me."

It was a bitter feeling, but passion is a soil in which deadly things will grow; and Vida's soul was more like a fair garden over which had crept the deadly nightshade and the poisonous aconite.

"Ruth shall die," she thought, and steeled her heart against all promptings of mercy.

To this end she spared Phoebe, and kept the deadly potion she had purchased at Carpinglean as a weapon to use in the end.

Meanwhile she watched and waited for the unfolding of events.

A month passed, and there was no further sign from Basil.

Vida grew hopeful, and Ruth despondent a little—but not much, for hope and trust were things that were part of her nature.

"Basil has promised to come, and he will come, surely," she said.

Kenard wrote to Vida double letters, one of which she could show to Ruth and the other keep for herself.

With bitter contempt, Vida read the outpourings of his ingenious heart.

"The love of a man wasted," she said. "It is nothing to me; why should it be so? Basil saw nothing in me, Kenard everything, and I must love the man who loves me not. It is the way of woman's life."

It was late in November when one day there came another letter for Ruth, directed in a disguised hand as before.

It was from Basil, and written much in the same terms as the last.

She was to wait and hope, and believe in him, and he would soon be with her.

"My letters," he wrote, "are posted for me, far away from where I am, and it may be, near home. Sometimes the horrible thought comes over me that they are not sent at all, but I cannot think that those I trust can be so base."

"Oh, Ruth, Ruth, my darling, your image is ever before me by day and in my dreams at night. I pray that time may speed away and bring me to you."

Of course she showed this to Vida, and put her anew upon the rack.

All doubts were dispelled; Basil was alive, and so far all her sinning had been fruitless.

She smiled on Ruth, and congratulated her, but when alone she raved and sobbed in the agony of mad passion, and the bitterness of her heart increased.

"I would kill both," she groaned, "but that would be too kind. One shall live and suffer."

December was well advanced, and the shortest day was at hand, when startling news came to Gordonfells.

It seemed that the old sexton found one of the ropes of his bells wrong, and went up to the belfry to see what was the matter. He ascended at night with a lantern, and stumbled over the decaying body of Bardolph.

In a frenzy of terror he staggered down the stairs, and to the village with the horrible news. In half an hour all the grown inhabitants were on the spot, and Mr. Moore, with a policeman, keeping order among the excited throng.

It was no pleasant task to inspect the body of the dead man, but it was done, and the ghastly remains were laid upon a hurdle in the cold moonlight.

"I know who it is, Mr. Moore," said the policeman, after closely scanning the face; "it's one of the gipsy lot; he called himself Bardolph Dimsey, and used to brag about his being a born gentleman."

"Poor fellow!" said Mr. Moore; "it matters little now what he was. He will never brag again."

It was impossible for them to correctly estimate how long he had lain there, but the doctor said it was three months at least, perhaps more, and it was the medical man's opinion that he had been murdered in the belfry.

"He looks as if he had fallen and died there," he said; "there are no signs of his being dragged or carried about after death."

This opinion went far to turn suspicion from the first direction it took, and to ex-

onerate the gipsies from any share in the crime.

"It would have been easier for them," said the inspector, when he came shortly after on the scene, "to have settled him in the wood, and buried him there."

When the news reached Gordonfells it caused a vast amount of commotion among the domestics. Phoebe was so far overcome as to faint away, and when they brought her round she went about her duties white and silent.

Whenever she met Vida she shuddered, and stood aside, and the look of having something to say but not daring to say it grew upon her face.

Vida could not but notice the aversion of the girl, and felt that it was a thing that must be dealt with promptly. Accordingly she seized the first opportunity to speak to her alone. Finding her in Ruth's room, when Ruth was out, she went quietly in and closed the door.

"Phoebe," she said, "what is the matter with you lately? Whenever I come near you I am subject to your rudeness. You turn away from me as if I were some repulsive stranger."

"Oh, miss," said the trembling girl, "I can't help it. It is such a horrible thing."

"What is so horrible, you fool?"

"The dead man as was found in the belfry, miss."

"Well," said Vida calmly, "what has that to do with me?"

"I don't know, miss," sobbed Phoebe, covering her face with her apron; "but I've had such ugly dreams about it. I'm in the churchyard night after night, and I see you go into the belfry, then I hear you talking to him, and then a horrible sound of a man falling, and groans, and then I see you come down with your face as white as snow, and go away, not seeing me hiding in the porch."

"Phoebe," said Vida fiercely, seizing her by the wrist, "let us have no more of this; I'll not endure it. Do you know what you are saying?"

"Oh, miss, it isn't a dream, it is true."

"It is a lie, you fool, and if you ever dare say another word about it, I'll have you charged with the murder."

"Mr. miss!" exclaimed Phoebe, looking up with a startled face.

"Yes, you," said Vida; "you and he were always in the wood together."

"Oh, miss! I never spoke to the man in my life."

"I will swear that I've seen you in the shrubbery and wood together," said Vida, with a set look of determination on her face, "and I have reproved you for it. Nay, more, I will swear that it was I who was in the churchyard and you in the belfry, and when it comes to the question of whose word is to be taken, who do you think will be believed?"

"Oh, miss, you are cruel—cruel!" sobbed Phoebe; "but spare me, I'm only a poor ignorant girl."

"Have done with your nonsense, then," said Vida; "come back to your senses, and let me have no more of your shuddering and turning away when I come near you. You understand me?"

"Yes, miss," replied the girl humbly.

"Very good; now go away and come at the usual hour to assist me to dress for dinner."

"Yes, miss," said Phoebe, and with a wretched look upon her face she crept from the room.

She knows much but can prove nothing," said Vida with a triumphant laugh. "The ignorant fool, to enter the lists with me! I will crush her if she dares to play her sliv-ering pranks on me again."

CHAPTER XIII.

A STORY STRANGE BUT TRUE.

It was not until the 10th of February that Basil wrote again, and then came a bulky letter from him, closely and carefully written.

It was the narrative of what had passed within his ken since that terrible St. Valentine's Eve, when the murderous hand of Bardolph Dimsey, at the bidding of a passion-led woman, sought his life.

He told his story briefly, and, as far as he could, clearly.

Much that was mysterious to him is already known to our readers, and we have only to reproduce his letter to make his full story clear.

"MY OWN DABBLING RUTH,—I write, as I hope and believe, to you for the last time from my hiding-place. When you have read this you need keep our secret no longer, for I shall promptly follow it, and I fervently trust be with you on the coming St. Valentine's Eve.

"Was ever story of man so strange as mine? A year ago I was on my way to you, and I was within almost speaking distance of my darling, when my life was attempted by a scoundrel whose full history I will tell you when we meet. I know it now, although it was strange to me only a few days ago.

"On the eve of last St. Valentine, I had just passed the old church, and Gordonfells was in sight, when a masked man sprang from the fence and stood full in my road. My horse swerved, and at the same moment the fellow fired two shots. The bullets missed, but my horse madly plunging, I fell heavily to the earth and became insensible. As I afterwards learned I lay like one dead, without visible breath or motion.

"Much that I am telling you I have only what was told me to give, but I believe it to be true. I was given to some of the would-be-murderer's friends for burial, and I was actually laid in my grave when I gave out signs of returning life.

"A repugnance against finishing the work, or pity, saved me. They lifted me up, filled in the grave, and carried me to a travelling-van belonging to one of their body, whom I only knew as Jim the showman. He set out at once, making his way north.

"For three weeks I was delicious, but constant care on the part of the showman's wife brought me back to life, and I found myself in a lonely country I knew nothing of, and practically a prisoner. I was with a gang of gipsies who kept watch over me day and night.

"The men were always armed, and I was given to understand that any attempt to escape would lead to my being shot. We were joined by another band shortly after, at the head of which was an old woman of very great age, named Hecate. I was an object

of interest to her, and she associated me with one Bardolph Dimsey in a way that I thought strange, until I learnt that this was the man who attempted to murder me.

"But why did he attempt it? He had not robbed me, nor did any of his people take a single thing from me except my liberty. They allowed me to retain everything, and I received the kindest care. I was in one sense a master among a host of attentive hired servants."

"I thought on the prospect of escape, but could see none. We were living in a broken country, removed, it seemed to me, from all civilisation. My sleeping-place was a cave, and I never walked abroad without half-a-dozen to guard me. Escape with life was hopeless.

"Gipsies went away, and gipsies came, and like watchful sentinels took up their duty and performed it faithfully. It was useless to attempt to bribe them. The least hint about money was met with a laugh and the assurance that it could not be taken.

"I saw old Hecate was at the bottom of it all, for after her arrival she took command of all and remained. Sometimes she would send for me to talk, and the theme was always this Bardolph, whom she seemed to love with a passionate devotion.

"After many weary months I began to note a change in my guardians. They were more kind to me if possible, and there seemed to me to be a fervent desire to gain my good opinion. Old Hecate was like the rest, and I thought I saw the light of liberty ahead.

"My darling, the thought of what you must be suffering, or what you might have been led to believe, tortured me exquisitely day and night, and I would have done much to ease your aching heart and put myself right in your eyes. Do you wonder then that I promised these people exemption for their keeping me captive if they would finally set me free?"

"They asked it, and I promised. It must not be forgotten that I owed my life to their forbearance, and to the ceaseless care of the showman's wife. It was to Bardolph Dimsey that punishment for my misery was due, and I did not say that he would be forgiven.

"Nor did they solicit it, and I found out the reason ere long. A suspicion had arisen among the gipsies that this man had deserted his people. They spoke of his marriage and his going away for a year, but it seemed that he ought to have communicated with them in some way, and he has not done so.

"He has left us, I heard Hecate say; 'turned his back on the people who loved him. He is a traitor.'

"In the next breath she wailed over him, and said he would come again, and ere long I learnt that I should not be set free until the anniversary of the day on which my life was attempted, so as to give the absent man a little grace.

"If he returned they would beg forgiveness for him, but if he did not I was at liberty to do as I wished. I could play the part of avenger to them and myself if it pleased me."

"Bardolph Dimsey, they told me, thought that I was dead and buried. They concealed my recovery from him, because they knew that he would have completed his work if he found I had escaped his murderous hand. Hecate also, it seemed, was anxious to save me, so that the sin of taking a life did not rest upon him.

"But what had I ever done to this man that he should seek to murder me? Nothing. Therefore it is clear that somebody set him on. Who could have done so cruel a thing? Whom have I so bitterly offended that they should seek my life?"

"I hope when I come what I may be able, my darling, to clear up much of this mystery. There is a growing disposition on the part of the gipsies to confide in me, and they may yet tell me all. But I can even bear this weight of the mystery if they will set me free.

"You have, I hope, heard from me ere this, as I have written twice, but I am given to understand that my letters have been posted far away—passed on from one wandering tribe to another, so as to give no clue to my whereabouts.

"My darling, I have nothing more to tell you now, except the glad tidings that Basil has deserted them, and I shall be free to leave them as soon as the midnight hour of the twelfth day of February is past.

"I am well and strong, and I shall travel with all the speed I can to you, and I hope to reach you somewhere about the self-same hour that I was expected last year.

"My hiding-place I know, but I have pledged my word not to say more than that it is a lonely part of Yorkshire, in a wild unfertile district, valuable to the agriculturist—the gipsies make it of little use to the sportsman.

"What more have I to say? Nothing on the score of my captivity, but oh, so much that bears on my love for you. But can I say it here? Will ink and paper speak as my tongue will when we meet? No—a thousand times no! Therefore, my darling, I will keep the overflowings of my heart until I come.—Your ever loving and devoted

BASIL."

To Vida first went Ruth, and left her, unconscious of the torture she had inflicted, to break the good news to Mr. and Mrs. Moore.

To say that it caused surprise would be to say little. Words cannot fully describe their utter amazement.

"Bardolph must hear of this at once," said Mr. Moore. "I will ride over and bring him back with me. We will keep him here until Basil comes. I should like to have an interview with the inspector, but—"

"Don't forget that Basil has given his word," said Ruth.

"True, my darling. We can do nothing until your valentine comes."

CHAPTER XIV.

BETWEEN THE DARK AND DAWN.

Mr. Moore had not far to ride ere he met Mr. Hugh Brandreth riding towards him. The first glance assured him that as far as Basil was concerned he had nothing to tell.

"Mr. Moore," said the happy father with a face beaming, "give me joy."

"You have not seen Basil?" said the father.

"No; but he is coming, and although the mystery of his absence puzzles me not a little, I care nothing for it. Suffice it to me that my boy lives."

"It is a curious affair altogether," returned Mr. Moore. "Who can be at the bottom of it?"

"The bottom is not to be found in the man who died in your church tower," said Mr. Brandreth. "He was only the tool. We must find the principal."

"Well spoken; we must find the principal. But how? The police have been working for many weeks and found nothing."

"The police have theories, and work up to them first. It takes a deal to put them on the right scent."

"What is your theory?"

"I have none, Mr. Moore."

"Nor I, unless it is a woman. You see, Brandreth, that Basil is only mortal like ourselves, and we in our youth were not absolutely free from indiscretion. He may have had a *lison*."

"I don't think so," replied Mr. Brandreth. "Basil is not a milksop, but, for a man, he held very fixed ideas of purity. He argued that we are unjust in casting a sinful woman out while we hail a sinful man as brother."

"It does seem unjust," replied Mr. Moore; "but there is a *per contra* view of the matter. A virtuous woman holds a higher position than a good man. Everything connected with woman is extreme."

"Just so."

"Well, Brandreth, what do you say to staying with us until your son arrives?"

"I was really coming to thrust myself upon you. I had a letter from Basil this morning, as you may guess, and in it he tells me that he should like to meet Ruth and myself at the same time. I took the hint, and came to ask you to take me in."

They rode back together, and long and earnest was the discussion that ensued between the elders.

Basil distinctly stated in his letter that no steps to unearth the principal offender were to be taken until his return, and this was somewhat perplexing.

"I am fairly burning to get at the root of the matter," said Mr. Brandreth, and Mr. Moore expressed a similar desire.

Kendal was on his way back, and was expected about the same time as Basil, earlier in the day perhaps, but not before the thirtieth of the month. The coincidence of the impending arrivals appeared very remarkable, but on the whole satisfactory.

Only Vida felt the shadow of the coming time. To her in any case it could bring naught but darkness. She must commit another crime or bear with the spectacle of the happy lovers together. And that she could not do.

"I should go mad," she said, "and in frenzy do something to lay the past bare. Go mad!—horrible thought!—and be put into a madhouse, and be shut out from the light and reason ever more. No, death rather."

At dinner she had to listen to the joyous talk of others, and join in occasionally. But she did it in a half-hearted fashion that drew Mr. Brandreth's attention, and two or three times she found him looking at her curiously.

His eyes were keen, with an analysing light in their depths that alarmed her, and she was thankful when Mrs. Moore rose and gave the signal for the ladies to retire.

In the drawing-room she was easier. Mr. Brandreth did not look at her earnestly any more, but was pleasant and chatty.

He asked her to sing, and turned over her music for her, "in the absence of a younger knight," he said, "but by-and-by one may come to you."

"Never," she answered with a fierce light in her eyes; "I am doomed to a single life—while I live."

He stood just a little behind her, and glancing down at the fair head and neck, saw that her bosom was throbbing wildly. His brows bent, and he became thoughtful again.

Did he read her secret then? Thinking it over afterwards he was not quite sure, but certainly he seemed to be looking at more of the inner woman than ever he had done before.

When she had sung the song he went back to a seat near Mrs. Moore, and came no more near Vida that night.

But to Ruth he showed a gentle courtesy expressive of his sympathetic feeling, and as it so chanced, Mr. and Mrs. Moore were engaged with each other, talking of Basil and the future.

(Continued next week.)

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